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How can we trust someone who does not know who he or she is?

Issues in Interpretative Authenticity in Vedic Studies

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We are experiencing an exciting time of revived zeal and enthusiasm where we are preparing to defend, refine and preserve our heritage, physical, cultural and ideological. We understand that with centuries of disturbed history of our civilization in India, destruction of centers of learning and suppressed psyche, the tradition has often labeled and proved untrustworthy. We do understand that due to various vested interests the purity in Vedic interpretations is also lost. To be able to reach any Vedic *jñāna*, the internalization or interpretation presupposes the freedom from any type of intellectual prison. The spillover between the states of mind has been one of the major stumbling block and cause of deteriorations in Vedic interpretations. The standard that can be set to accept the acceptability itself, is whether the interpreter has broken the walls of his intellectual prison before venturing into Vedic interpretation? In what follows we will be touching some pertinent issues which, if overlooked, may cause damage, possibly some time irreparable by the future generations.

From *agre*, the time immemorial, to the human quest on first manifestation, as in Nāsadiya, RV10.129; the Breath of the First Principle, subsequent manifestations and topological transformations leading to the formation of our multi-universes, to the emergence of *manas* and subsequent psyche, ability of judgment by discrimination, consequent thoughts and tradition, and further human quests for understanding of the universe, subsequent methodologies, analytic, analogical, inductive, deductive and corroborative ways of reasoning and strategies thereof, opened the Pandora of information on our phenomenological existence in the universe perceived so far. The discriminating imprisoned mind of the observer, human and its subordinate technologies, finds itself at ease with the working on and within these perceptual paradigms. At

this point, it is customary to discuss questions, observations, data, hypotheses, testing, and theories, which are the formal parts of the scientific method, but these are NOT the most important components of the scientific method. The scientific method is practiced within a context of scientific thinking, and scientific (and critical) thinking is based on three things:

- a. using empirical evidence (empiricism),
- b. practicing logical reasoning (rationalism), and
- c. possessing a skeptical attitude (skepticism) about presumed knowledge that leads to self-questioning, holding tentative conclusions, and being un-dog-matic (willingness to change one's beliefs).

These three ideas or principles are universal throughout science; without them, there would be no scientific or critical thinking, developed to analyse the phenomenal universe and we are accustomed to apply and use the same for whatever and where ever we wish. We have developed a nasty habit of reducing everything, qualitative and quantitative, down to fit to these criteria, and advent of new digital technologies have provided handy tools. The principle of least effort , inherent in human nature, has made the human judgment a slave of the analytical methodologies available at the point of time.

Simultaneously, in the light of *vijñānam ānandaṁ brahma* ŚB.14.6.9.34; BṛhU.3.9.34. in Vedic tradition, we receive knowledge directly from authorities, in essence, not subjected to the four defects of all conditioned living entities, unattainable through speculation because of inherent mental imperfections. All the great reformers have been declaring, directly or indirectly, that they have come not to destroy the dharma, but to fulfill it. They have not been content to accept something simply because it is handed down by the tradition or on the basis of speculations, as called by the modern scholarship, of the imprisoned mind. This demands, in order to be able to do justice with the interpretation and for nearest approximation of the truth, at least, that the interpreter must be in the minds of our Vedic Rishis, or at least in the state of *sthiti-prajna*. When any one equipped with the methodologies developed for phenomenological universe in its widest coverage begins to analyse and puts forth his conclusions, needless to say, is bound to commit errors leading some times to erroneous conclusions. Such a scholar is bound to resort to ad-hoc tricks which is well pointed out by Prof. V. S. Agarawal as follows:

"It is now high time for Vedic scholars to realise, if they would redeem Vedic studies from stagnation, that the orthodox and traditional interpretation of the Vedas is essentially *AdhyAtmic*. The *Brahmana* writers of the old look upon the Vedas as document of spiritual culture. Modern scholars no doubt have spent infinite labour on handling the texts and interpreting them, but they were circumscribed in their scope mostly to sifting antiquarian material which had only by chance become incorporated in these works. When the interpretation of Vedic thought confronts them with difficulty, the language of the hymns is declared to be obscure, and most of the

mystical expressions are taken to be incoherent on account of the imperfect understanding of the grammar of philosophic ideas behind them." [1]

Recently at the 16th World Sanskrit Conference, 28th June -2nd July 2015, Bangkok I gained some exposure to current practices in translation of Scriptures, which reminds me the words, from Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, on the translations of Indian Scriptures, written more than six decades ago still stand correct. He writes,

"Existing translations of Vedic texts, however etymologically "accurate" are too often unintelligible or unconvincing, sometimes admittedly unintelligible to the translator himself. Neither the Sacred Books of the East nor for example such translations of the Upanishads as those by R.E.Hume or those of Mitra, Roer, and Cowell, recently reprinted, even approach the standards set by such works as Thomas Taylor's version of the Enneads of Plotinus, or Friedlander's of Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed."

He further writes,

"Translators of the Vedas do not seem to have possessed any previous knowledge of metaphysics, but rather to have gained their first and only notion of ontology from Sanskrit sources."

"It is very evident that for an understanding of the Veda, a knowledge of Sanskrit, however profound, is insufficient. Indians themselves do not rely upon their knowledge of Sanskrit here, but insist upon the absolute necessity of study at the feet of a guru. That is not possible in the same sense to students in the West. Yet they also possess a tradition founded in the first principles."

And ultimately,

"What right have Sanskritists to confine their labors to the solution of linguistic problems; is it fear that precludes their wrestling with the ideology of the texts they undertake? Our scholarship is too little humane..."[2]

"There is only one solution", points Prof. V.S. Agarwala, "to this difficulty. We should now begin to study more closely the explanations of the mystical Vedic terminology offered in the indigenous literature, specially the *BrahmaNas* and the *Aranyakas*, which are replete with interpretational material that has remained useless in the absence of the *Adhyatmic* school of Vedic interpreters. Unfortunately, there are many today who could claim to represent the *Aitihasikas* and *AkhyAnvidas* of Yaska, but very few who could say that they are carrying on the torch of the *Adhyatma-vidas* referred to in the Nirukta." [1]

The unavoidable prerequisite for such pursuit is that the interpreting scholar has to be *stihiprajna*, if any success, at least, to acceptable credibility has to be retained.

The fact is, writes Dr. Coomaraswamy, "On the one hand, the professional scholar, who has direct access to the sources, functions in isolation; on the other, the amateur propagandist of Indian thought disseminates mistaken notions. Between the two, no provision is made for the educated man of good will." [2]

Swings are the natural in human nature. No matter it is a down trend or uptrend, tendency tries to propel to its extreme. That is why Scriptures suggest *sam-bhAva*.

There are some other very important issues which crave our immediate attention. The enthusiasm takes its course and we find many such tendencies in recent Vedic studies as well. Some notable ones need special attention before we commit irreparable damages. The foremost tendency observed is to try to find most of the "current" scientific theories and evidences in Vedas, though in good faith as an attempt to restore the dignity of the Vedas, so undermined and downgraded during recent centuries for vested interests.

Before exploring this tendency as a "problem" we must have a look at the history of science. We understand that in the field of scientific methodologies there have been professional rivalry between logicians, empiricists, skepticists and we also know that the Godel's Theory of Incompleteness has shown the limits of our knowledge. Even the most formal sciences like mathematics and its allied theoretical sciences have been facing logicism-intuitionism controversy, similarly with the frequentist and subjective probabilities. Each has its own positive and negative sides, fighting throughout their histories but no one is complete without the other if the fullness is aimed at.

In the field of Vedic Studies, especially in translations and interpretations, St. Petersburg School with its authorities culminating to recent translation of the Rig Veda by Jamison and Brereton in the West, diverging widely from the Geldner's commendable translation which has been more sympathetic to *Bharatiya* Vedic tradition, we have a full spectrum to judge and find where do we stand depending on the level of our own realization and levels of understanding.

Let us have a look on the history of what are called "hard" sciences. For convenience and keeping in view the disciplinary affiliations of the audience, we confine to the most rudimentary facts of popular physical sciences. When Newton gave his mechanics it was believed then that scientific quest is over and most explanations are found, on gravitation, on movement of celestial bodies, mechanics etc. As soon as the theory of relativity and subsequently the quantum mechanics came up, Newtonian mechanics shifted to historical interests and only its distilled ideas survived with quantum mechanics. Though it looks like current status but the fact is that all these developments are nearly a century old now and we have reached to quantum cosmology, from black hole to worm holes, and from gravitation to black body and support to

celestial bodies by space - time mesh. Every new development either transforms the old one or replaces it altogether.

With this background let us come to the point with deliberate intent to keep the core ideas free from technical jargons. With science and technology developing and changing rapidly it is not unreasonable to forecast that physics, mathematics and all other sciences and technologies will be quite different and possibly quite strange from what we have at present in not very far in future but four or five hundred years from now.

If we encourage and continue with the tendency of assigning every Vedic *mantras* or *sloka* with an existing scientific concept or theory and interpret that way just to prove that it all is present in what we call Vedic, we are in fact dating a knowledge which has been received as Timeless. We can imagine what damage will we do to this Timeless when it is assigned with a current scientific conceptual meaning and after not far in future we find that those concepts are either obsolete or useless altogether. Then we will find ourselves, once again, at the same place we are now and shall need to reconsider the interpretations defending once again that our Vedic knowledge have not become obsolete with the assigned conceptual and scientific terms.

We therefore need to be very careful in preserving the Timeless nature of our Vedic knowledge while interpreting it in terms of phenomenological and ever changing and mortal scientific theories and technological concepts.

Subham bhavatu

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